Introducing the Major International Relations Theories

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International Relations theory allows us to ask questions of our history, our present, and even gain insights into our future. It gives us a toolkit that forms an essential part of International Relations as an academic discipline. This extract from *Foundations of International Relations* (McGlinchey 2022) is designed with three objectives. First, to show when and why each successive theory emerged. Second, to outline the central features of each theory so that you can understand the basics of how they work and get an appreciation of the insights they offer. Finally, to unpack certain elements of the theories to reveal some of their complexity. Due to its complexity and diversity, newcomers often have difficulty in grasping International Relations theory. So, in order to consider the field as a whole for beginners it is necessary to simplify International Relations theory. Here, we do so by splitting theory into three categories – 'traditional', 'middle ground' and 'critical'. In order to simplify further, the various named theories will be presented as theory families. Much like real families, theory families have members who disagree on many things – but they still share core commonalities.

Theories allow us to understand and try to make sense of the world around us through different perspectives – each of which are ways to simplify a complicated world. Theories are like maps. Each map is made for a certain purpose and what is included in the map is based on what is necessary to direct the map's user in a clear, and useful, manner. Embarking on the study of International Relations without an understanding of theory is like setting off on a journey without a map. You might arrive at your destination, or somewhere else very interesting, but you will have no idea where you are or how you got there. And you will have no response to someone who insists that their route would have been better or more direct. Each different theory puts different things on its map, based on what its theorists believe to be important. Variables to plot on an International Relations map would be such things as states, organisations, individuals, economics, history, class, power, gender and so on. Theorists then use their chosen variables, and omit the others, to construct a simplified view of the world that can be used to analyse events – and in some cases to have a degree of predictive ability.

The 'traditional' theories: liberalism and realism

As International Relations itself was born out of the need to address the causes of war in the early twentieth century, the two traditional theories of the discipline – liberalism and realism – offered their own unique contrasting responses. Both theory families have been robustly challenged in the modern era, essentially because of their focus on issues at the system and state levels – like war and peace, for example – at the expense of other issues at the group and individual levels. Yet, despite these challenges, both liberalism and realism remain central to the discipline because of the distinctive insights that they offer.

Liberalism grew out of a set of principles based in idealism, which asserted that a better world was possible. Liberals view human beings as innately good and believe peace and harmony between nations is not only achievable, but desirable. Immanuel Kant developed the idea in the late eighteenth century that states that shared liberal values should have no reason for going to war against one another. In Kant's eyes, the more liberal states there were, the more peaceful the world would become, since liberal states are ruled by their citizens and citizens are rarely

disposed to desire war. This is in contrast to the rule of kings and other non-elected rulers (who today we may call dictators or autocrats), who frequently have selfish desires out of step with citizens and are typically quicker of mind to make decisions that would send ordinary people into danger. Kant's ideas have resonated and continue to be developed by liberals, most notably in the democratic peace theory which posits that democracies do not go to war with each other – for the very reasons Kant outlined. To take this idea further, the theory argues that the more democracies there are, the more peace there will be in the international system. A common misunderstanding is often found here: democratic peace theory does not mean that war will end, but that its occurrences will shrink in number over time as more liberal democracies emerge. It also does not exclude the fact that liberal democracies will sometimes go to war with illiberal/non-democratic states for perceived security reasons – an example of which can be seen in the two US-led invasions of Iraq in 1991 and 2003.

Liberals do not just base their arguments on the spread of democracy. They also focus on two key elements of interaction between nation-states: trade and international organisations. For liberals trade is how states, and their peoples, interact during times of peace. They do this by exchanging products and services back and forth, often things that other states do not possess. This is a positive-sum interaction for both parties and inevitably also leads to the sharing of culture, ideas and the movement of people due to the literal and figurative pathways that are opened between nations. Positive-sum interactions are also important to liberals in a general sense as they prove that interactions between peoples and states can benefit both sides, rather than just one. As long as each party benefits to some degree (in the case of trade those states participating) then the result is a net positive for all. Everyone gains *something*. This may be that one side benefits financially from selling tea, and the other side benefits in a non-financial way by adding tea to their culture as tea leaves do not grow well in their climate or geography. In this sense, trade enriches all that come into contact with it, either directly, or indirectly. This positive-sum interaction does not have to be equal for both sides so long as something is gained by each party. For liberals, trade, being positive-sum, opens up communication links and shows the benefits of peaceful interactions across cultures that offer yet one more way to avoid war, as should a war occur then trade ceases between the warring parties and the benefits are lost.

The second element of interaction between states, international organisations, is a much newer phenomenon. Different cultures have been shown to have been trading since historical records began thousands of years ago. Yet we have only witnessed international organisations becoming a permanent structural component of the global system in the twentieth century, principally with the establishment of the United Nations in October 1945, although there were notable, and largely unsuccessful, earlier attempts at using organisations to establish order on a more limited scale. For liberals, international organisations provide a second element that underlines their theory. Simply by having a permanent 'big table' around which to interact and conduct diplomacy – and in the modern era there are many tables of this kind at regional and global levels – states can find ways to solve disputes. This lessens the need for war and provides a forum for diplomacy which, although rooted in compromise, can offer solutions that are acceptable to those who are in arbitration. International organisations are, therefore, central to the modern liberal account of International Relations.

It is no surprise that the liberal account is one that points towards a world of peace and harmony, and this has always been the case for liberals, who see that as their desired end goal for the global system. Yet, for liberals this is not philosophical idealism, but a conclusion that comes by virtue of manifestly real phenomena such as trade, international organisations and the spread of democracy. Each of these provides proof for their central idea that alternatives to war exist. Of course, having read the prior chapters of this book, you will know that our world has seen a lot of war and that warfare has become more deadly. So it is clear that despite the evidence for their claims, liberals have opposition. To help explain this, we can track back to US President Woodrow Wilson who addressed his famous 'Fourteen Points' to the US Congress in January 1918 during the final year of the First World War. As he presented his ideas for a rebuilt world beyond the war, the last of his points was to create a general association of nations, which became the League of Nations – essentially a prototype for today's United Nations. Dating back to 1920, the League of Nations was created largely for the purpose of overseeing affairs between states and implementing, as well as maintaining, international peace. However, when the League was unable to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, its failure became difficult for liberals to comprehend, as events seemed to contradict their theories. Indeed it was analysing this timeline that the phrase 'idealist' came to be used widely as a pejorative to mock liberals for their apparently misplaced optimism, most notably by Carr (1939).

Despite the efforts of prominent liberal scholars and politicians, liberalism failed to retain a strong hold and another theory emerged to explain the continuing presence of war. That theory became known as realism. Realism gained momentum during the Second World War when it appeared to offer a convincing account for how and why the worst conflict in known history commenced after a period of supposed peace and optimism between 1918 and 1938. Although it originated in named form in the twentieth century, many realists have traced its origins to earlier writings. Indeed, realists have looked as far back as to the ancient world to the writings of the Greek historian Thucydides (460–400 BCE) where they detected similar patterns of human behaviour as those evident in our modern world.

As its name suggests, advocates of realism purport it reflects the 'reality' of the world and more effectively accounts for change in international politics. Thomas Hobbes is another historical figure often mentioned in discussions of realism due to his description of the brutality of life during the English Civil War of 1642–51. Hobbes described human beings as living in an orderless 'state of nature' that he perceived as a war of all against all. To remedy this, he proposed that a 'social contract' was required between a ruler and the people of a state to maintain relative order. Today, we take such ideas for granted as it is usually clear who rules our states. Each leader, or 'sovereign' (a monarch or a parliament, for example) sets the rules and establishes a system of punishments for those who break them. We accept this in our respective states so that our lives can function with a sense of security and order. It may not be ideal, but it is better than a state of nature where chaos and anarchy (the lack of a higher authority) prevail. As no such contract exists internationally and there is no sovereign in charge of the world, disorder and fear rules international relations. That is why war seems more common than peace to realists, indeed they see war as inevitable. When they examine history they see a world that may change in shape, but is always characterised by a system of what they call 'international anarchy' as the global system lacks the kind of hierarchical order that we experience within our domestic societies.

The best way to understand realism and how it views the global system is to break it into elements, as we have already done with liberalism. Dunne and Schmidt (2020) have helpfully described these as the three Ss of realism: *statism*, *survival* and *self-help*. Statism helps us understand what realists mean by 'international anarchy' as it focuses us on the idea that the central actors in the global system are nation-states who compete on a technically level playing field. There is no higher power beyond a nation-state, and for any group of people to become a 'player' in international relations they need to secure their sovereignty and form their own state. Once statehood is achieved, the next order of business is survival. As there is no higher power regulating the global system, states will frequently clash and seek to dominate each other. For this reason, for realists, whatever needs to be done to ensure the security of the state against the threats (actual or potential) is warranted. Finally, realists argue that as a state pursues its survival over time, it can only ensure the best chances of surviving by understanding the necessity of self-help. Trusting in an international organisation like the United Nations, or relying on the promises of another state, is potentially perilous because it puts your fate in the hands of an external actor, which is unwise. So, each state must take the required steps to help itself. This may be in the form of growing its military, forming fair-weather (temporary) alliances, or by developing other attributes that may deter an attack by another state.

The best way to understand realism and how it views the global system is to break it into elements, as we have already done with liberalism. Dunne and Schmidt (2020) have helpfully described these as the three Ss of realism: statism, survival and self-help. These core elements are at odds with liberalism, as when a realist looks at the world, they see a world of danger. To go back to the liberal idea of positive-sum outcomes, realists invert this concept and see most interactions through zero-sum logic, where they are more concerned with the idea of relative gains. For example, a liberal would see trade as an interaction where all parties gain something, and in that sense a scenario of absolute gains when measured for its overall effect. Trade, then, gives all parties mutual enrichment – such as the trading of tea analogy from above. But, seeing this from a realist point of view, should that tea-rich state decide to use the profits of their tea trade to build a massive military and attempt to grow their power and territory by dominating other states, then trading with them actually enables them to (potentially) become a future mortal enemy. For reasons such as this, realists see most interactions between states as zero-sum. Any interaction where a rival state gains in a relative sense, even if they only gain something small, is a loss to your state as it has made a competitor richer, and potentially more powerful. And, as the global system is anarchical and based on self-help, that interaction may at some point prove to be one that is regretted.

Realists are sometimes confused with isolationists – those who seek to put up barriers to interactions and pursue national self-sufficiency by removing themselves from international affairs. Realists are not isolationists. They simply caution that interactions should always be carefully entered into, always taken with a strong pinch of salt, and measured through the logic of their three Ss. Contrary to isolationism, realists recognise the necessity for all states to continually engage in international relations so they can assess their relative power and security against that of other states – which is constantly in flux.

Another central area that sets realism and liberalism apart is how they view human nature. Realists do not typically believe that human beings are inherently good, or have the potential for good, as liberals do. Instead, they claim individuals act in their own self-interests. For realists, people (and states by extension) are selfish and behave according to their own needs without necessarily taking into account the needs of others. Therefore, realists believe conflict is unavoidable and perpetual, and so war is common and inherent to humankind. Underlining this further, Hans Morgenthau, a prominent realist, is known for his famous statement 'all politics is a struggle for power' (Morgenthau 1948). This demonstrates the typical realist view that politics is primarily about domination as opposed to cooperation between states.

Here, it is useful to recall the idea of theories being maps. Realists and liberals see a similar global system, but they draw different conclusions from what they see. When viewing that system through realist eyes, it appears to reveal a terrain of domination and power. The realist worldview therefore magnifies instances of war and conflict and uses those to map out a certain picture of the world, one of an ever-changing dynamic of competing states of varying power and influence. Essentially, all that is on the realist map is terrain and spheres of influence divided among states. Liberals, when looking at the same world, adjust their view of the very same terrain to blur out areas of domination and instead bring areas of cooperation into focus. They do this by adding a transparent layer on top of the realist map that overlays additional features such as international organisations and global trade that sit above and between competing states. When that additional layer is overlaid, the map takes on a very different meaning. Leaving this analogy behind, you may realise the subjective nature of such worldviews. This may seem arbitrary, but these theories have significant real-world impact and often influence how leaders see the world. The reason that realism and liberalism have remained central to International Relations despite their age is that they remain relevant to policy and offer valid (albeit competing) roadmaps to politicians seeking to navigate their state's way through the global system.

It is important to understand that there is no single liberal or realist theory, and this will become apparent as you progress in your studies and engage with the primary works of the theorists. Each scholar has a particular interpretation of the world, which includes ideas of peace, war and the role of the state in relation to individuals. Furthermore, both realism and liberalism have been updated to more modern versions (neoliberalism and neorealism) that represent a shift in emphasis from their roots. And those updated versions each have themselves many subdivisions. Nevertheless, these perspectives can still be grouped into theory 'families'. For example, if we think of the simple contrast of optimism and pessimism we can see the familial relationship in all branches of realism and liberalism. Liberals share an optimistic view of International Relations, believing that the world order can be improved, with peace and progress gradually replacing war. They may not agree on the details, but this optimistic view generally unites them. Conversely, realists tend to dismiss optimism as a form of misplaced idealism and instead they arrive at a more pessimistic view. This is due to their focus on the centrality of the state and its need for security and survival in an anarchical system where it can only truly rely on itself. As a result, realists reach an array of accounts that describe a system where war and conflict are common, and periods of peace are merely times when states are preparing for future conflict.

Another point to keep in mind is that each of the overarching approaches possesses a different perspective on the nature of the state. In what may be a familial similarity rather than a difference, both liberalism and realism consider the state to be the dominant actor in the system – possessing ultimate power. This includes the capacity to enforce decisions, such as declaring war on another state, or agreeing treaties that may bind states to certain agreements. The traditional theories analyse, and also recognise, the basic structure that was put in place after the Treaty of Westphalia when the modern state system came to embody Europe, and later the world. Yet, digging a little deeper, differences soon present themselves when we consider how each theory considers international organisations and

trade relationships in relation to states. In terms of liberalism, its proponents argue that the global governance capabilities provided by international organisations, and the opportunities offered by trade, are valuable. These assist states in formulating decisions, build relationships, and formalise cooperation that leads to more peaceful outcomes. Realists on the other hand believe states partake in international organisations and trade only when it is in their self-interest to do so.

The 'middle ground' theories: The English school and constructivism

An increasing number of scholars have begun to reject the traditional theories because of their obsession with the state and the status quo. In doing so they have opened up a middle ground between realism and liberalism on the one hand, and between the traditional theories and a range of critical theories on the other hand (these will be explored later). The thinking of the English school is often viewed as the first attempt to establish a middle ground in International Relations theory, albeit in this case a middle ground between liberal and realist theories. The English school involves the idea of a society of states existing at the international level. Hedley Bull, one of the core figures of the English school, agreed with the traditional theories that the global system was anarchic. However, he insisted this does not mean the absence of norms (expected behaviours), thus claiming a societal aspect to international politics. In this sense, states form an 'Anarchical Society' (Bull 1977) where a type of order does exist, based on shared norms and behaviours.

The English school is useful to help flag up a general misunderstanding that students often have that anarchy means chaos. The work of Bull and others in the English school draws attention to how international anarchy has its own unique type of order. After all, the world is not in a state of perpetual chaos despite its state of anarchy. It is not unfair to describe this as liberal realism, as it essentially posits (in its basic form) that the global order – as anarchic as it is – is not as pessimistic as the realists make out, yet not quite as optimistic as the liberals assert. English school theorists continue to develop their arguments beyond these observations (see Murray 2015), but for our purposes the central importance was that it showed that theoretical development beyond realism and liberalism was both welcome and possible.

Constructivism is another theory that can be viewed as a middle ground, but this time between the traditional theories and the critical theories that we will explore in the next chapter. It also has some familial links with the English school. But, it goes further and offers up new tools and insights in our theory toolkit. Constructivists highlight the importance of values and shared interests between individuals who interact on the global stage, as well as social norms that bring them together. Additionally, constructivists are interested in emphasising the agency of individuals, which in other words refers to people's ability to seek and implement change. As you may have already picked up when recalling the themes of the previous chapter, this breaks theory out of its focus on the system and state levels of analysis and reaches into the group and individual levels.

Alexander Wendt, a prominent constructivist, described the relationship between agents (individuals) and structures (such as the state) as one in which structures not only constrain agents but also construct their identities and interests. His phrase 'anarchy is what states make of it' (Wendt 1992) sums this up well and helps to advance some of the points made by English school theorists. Another way to explain this, and to explain the core of constructivism, is that the essence of international relations exists in the interactions between individuals. After all, states do not interact; it is agents of those states – such as politicians and diplomats – who interact, leading to a greater likelihood of mutual cooperation. Since those interacting on the world stage have accepted international anarchy as its defining principle, it has become part of our reality. However, if anarchy is what we make of it, then states and their agents can perceive anarchy differently and the qualities of anarchy can change over time. International anarchy could even be replaced by a different system if an influential group of individuals (and by proxy the states they represent) accepted the idea. To understand constructivism is to understand that certain ideas, or 'norms' as they are often called once those ideas become expected behaviours, have power. As such, constructivists seek to study the process by which existing norms emerge, and then are challenged and potentially replaced with new norms.

To explore this issue in a more tangible way we can look at the basic idea of the existence of the nation-state. Sovereignty was an idea that was accepted in Europe in the mid-1600s, and then gradually took hold over the

ensuing centuries until it became a global 'norm'. There is simply no other accepted way to organise peoples that is currently recognised internationally. Today, when we look at a world map, the entire landmass of the earth (with the exception of Antarctica which has no native population) is divided into sovereign nation-states separated by physical borders. Understanding the value of constructivism is understanding that all those things that we take for granted, like the states we belong to and where they end geographically and another state begins, are simply constructs of human beings: they were agreed upon and built at a certain time and they will endure for as long as we want to keep them and invest in them. If a better idea takes hold, then we will see systemic change as we adjust to it and adopt it.

Constructivists examine the process of how new ideas emerge from within the policy-making machines of states, and also sometimes from individuals that they call 'norm entrepreneurs'. Then they track when and how these ideas become adopted – or when they do not. It is even possible to see the construction of your own nationality this way. At some point, a sovereign established control of a defined territory (your nation-state), then created a flag, an anthem, adopted a national language and perhaps even a state religion – amongst other things. These were all choices made by someone, somewhere, that became meaningful over time and are usually taken for granted today. However, once you realise the constructed nature of everything in the political world, even your own nationality in which you may be very invested, you can appreciate the value of what constructivism brings to the table.

Identity is, then, another key component of constructivism. When individuals (agents) interact, usually on behalf of a state, they do so in a social environment. This is why constructivism is sometimes referred to as 'social constructivism'. Put simply, identity is social, it exists between people via their interactions. Think of it this way, you would not know much about who you were and what makes you distinctive unless you could compare yourself to others. That may be others within your own society, or other states. That awareness of identity as being socially constructed completes the basic picture of what constructivism offers. It also indicates why constructivists often find their attention drawn to international organisations. For example, if the United Nations can be pictured as a 'big table' around which representatives of states sit, this can be visualised as the place where the world's norms (expected behaviours) are constructed through social interactions between elite actors representing their respective states. Then those norms can be regularly tested, challenged and sometimes changed. If you want to look at this in a more human sense – people make, and then remake, our global system. Everything is built by individuals making their ideas reality. The only barrier is that an idea must become a norm, signifying it has been accepted by others in the system.

It is hopefully clear how constructivism diverges from liberalism and realism by opening up International Relations theory beyond a simple argument between optimism and pessimism broadly focused on the system and state levels of analysis. It moves International Relations theory into a more holistic position, which over time has become a middle ground that offers a message that can be more appealing than other theories. Namely, everything is socially constructed. So, if aspects of the global order are flawed or troubling, they are not fixed in place or inevitable – they can be remade. This disrupts the rather unchanging world that realists, for example, see. So, if, as for many students and scholars, realism and liberalism do not put enough variables on their maps, constructivism offers a welcome alternative.

The 'critical' theories

As our global system has grown in complexity, the family of theories that International Relations offers in response has grown in number. Recalling the previous sections, a debate between realism and liberalism has been raging since the foundation of the discipline. We also learned that the English school attempted to open up a middle ground between these two duelling theory families, a trend that was expanded when constructivism emerged. While developments like these held court for much of the twentieth century, a growing number of voices began to enter the discipline expressing dissatisfaction with the range of possibilities that International Relations theory was offering. By the end of the Cold War in 1991 – and considering the resulting changes in world order – a range of theories emerged that were critical of the journey that International Relations had taken thus far. These were Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism and poststructuralism. The uniting thread between these approaches was a perception that there was a need to examine alternative ways of ordering our world, and in doing so expose factors that the traditional theories have chosen to downplay or ignore. The critical approaches are to varying degrees 'revolutionary' in the

sense that they seek material changes to the status quo.

To help us understand why theoretical shifts take place we can refer to Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962). This book set the stage for understanding, in general, how and why certain theories are legitimised and widely accepted. Kuhn also identified the process that takes place when theories are no longer relevant and new theories emerge. For example, the vast majority of human beings were once convinced that the earth was flat. With the advancement of science and technology, there was a significant discovery that led humans to discard this belief. When such a discovery takes place, a 'paradigm shift' results and the former ways of thinking are replaced by new ones. Although changes in International Relations theory are not as dramatic as the example above, there have been significant evolutions in the discipline. This is important to keep in mind when we consider how theories play a role in explaining the world and how, based upon different time periods and our personal contexts, one approach may speak to us more than another.

When we discuss 'critical' approaches to International Relations theory, much as we did when we labelled the prior theories 'traditional' and 'middle ground', we are using a simplifying device to refer to (and make sense of) a wide spectrum of theories that have been established. The 'critical' theory families share one particular trait – they are critical of commonly held assumptions in the discipline that have been central since its establishment. To borrow a common distinction, the traditional theories are built on simply observing the world 'as it is' rather than reaching for images of the world as it 'ought to be' and putting many more variables and investigations on the theoretical map. For those with a critical approach, the altered circumstances of the global system since the end of the Cold War called for approaches that are better suited to understand, as well as question, the more complex world we find ourselves in. Such theories are valuable because they identify things that have typically been ignored or overlooked and also seek out ways to transform our world. In that sense, the critical approaches also generally reject middle ground approaches as they do not usually go far enough in providing a voice to individuals who have frequently been marginalised, particularly women and those from the Global South.

Marxism

Marxism is a good place to start with critical theories. It is a disparate theoretical family held together by one key point: the global system should be replaced. Therefore, Marxism is unabashedly a revolutionary theory. The theory is based upon the ideas of Karl Marx and consequently is the only theory of International Relations that is named after a person. Although Marx is a historical figure, his writings have lived on and inspired a modern vein of critical theories that relate directly to contemporary issues. As Marx himself famously stated, philosophical writings typically only interpret the world rather than outline how to change it. Answering that call, Marxists today – and the wide range of critical theoretical families they inspire – are interested in understanding all the historical elements of today's global system. Taking that knowledge, which spans economic, political and social critique, they focus on how our global system empowers some groups (mainly the elite, or 'the 1 per cent') and simultaneously disempowers others (the everyday person, or 'the 99 per cent'). For this to change, the legitimacy of the state must be questioned and then it must be ultimately dissolved. In that sense, emancipation from the state in some form is the essence of the system change Marxists seek. Marxists believe that we are not born free – instead we need to be freed via the proliferation of revolutionary thinking that raises awareness of the injustices of the global system.

This critique, and dismissal, of the central unit of International Relations – the nation-state – is what makes Marxism so relevant as the major underpinning critical theory. The traditional theories take a world of nation-states as a given and therefore fail to envision what a global order would look like if formulated differently. Worse, by taking the state for granted, there is little or no incentive to critique the role of the state and the negative effects it has. For example, the state has a monopoly on warfare, deciding how and when to conquer territory or kill another state's citizens. It also has the exclusive right to tax people, decide what 'the law' is and to demand allegiance from its citizens under penalties that range from fines, to imprisonment, to death. In addition, states partake in, and therefore legitimise, globalised capitalist trade systems that have led to ever-growing inequalities across the world. The rich seem to get richer, while the bulk of humanity remains exploited. Marxists believe this is a corrupt arrangement, and it is only with the dissolution of states from the world map that humankind will free itself of the chains of domination and inequality.

As the global system grew through the twentieth century to incorporate powerful international organisations in addition to states, such as the United Nations, Marxists saw further problems. In particular, Marxists view the globalisation project of the 1990s onwards as one that legitimised and locked in the very patterns of inequality that Marx had exposed more than a century earlier. This is because the United Nations, and the other organisations associated with it, only represent states, not people. To Marxists, the supposed grand projects within the United Nations – such as the establishment of human rights – are no more than band aids over a deeper corruption that has become all-encompassing.

It must be noted that modern Marxism does not have one clear idea of what a stateless world would look like. This is all the more complex as prior experiments with variants of Marx's own solution, communism, gradually fell apart in each of approximately twenty-five states in which it was tried during the twentieth century. Therefore, while the course of history and human experience has muted communism as a viable system, it did not kill Marx's longevity as the source of a body of work that provides the bedrock for critiquing the modern global system. In other words, the real-world failures of communism as a viable political and economic system did not take away from the vitality of Marx's theoretical critique that power is not fairly distributed.

Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism differs from Marxism by focusing its critique on the inequality between states or regions, as opposed to classes. The effects of colonialism are still felt in many regions of the world today as local populations continue to deal with the challenges created and left behind by the former colonial powers. Postcolonialism's origins can be traced to the Cold War period when much international activity centred around decolonisation and the ambition to undo the legacies of European imperialism. With the independence movements of the twentieth century, the peoples of the Global South rebelled 'against the false belief that providence created some to be menials of others' (Nkrumah 1963, ix). Central to postcolonial scholarship is the idea that the prejudices, biases, ideas and understandings that made colonialism possible in the first place did not disappear overnight with the granting of independence to former colonies. While they may have been forced to renounce most of their territorial claims, Western states are far from treating the former colonies as their equals – despite what the principle of sovereignty asserts. Postcolonial theory offers a way to identify these 'neocolonial' practices that create and then reproduce global inequalities.

For postcolonial scholars, an important endeavour is to highlight the colonial legacies that created current inequalities and the neocolonial power structures that reproduce them. Take, for example, a dominant image in the West of the continent of Africa as a place in need of financial aid, a moral burden, a drain on resources. Yet, Africa is also a place of great wealth and resources that have consistently been extracted (taken) by outsiders. Underlining the postcolonial critique further, while they may no longer be under direct colonial control, two-thirds of the world's poor live in states that are rich in natural resources. One of the main reasons for this is that cash crops and valuable minerals are still extracted and exported to the Global North – now by transnational corporations instead of colonial governments. Struggling economies of the Global South compete to attract transnational corporations for the employment and revenues they will bring. Yet in order to do so, they join a 'race to the bottom', pitting countries against one another for who can offer the lowest taxes and cheapest labour and thus the greatest profits.

Take, for example, Ghana, home to the so-called 'Gold Coast', rich in minerals and petroleum. Between 2004 and 2008, mineral exports from Ghana increased by 50 per cent and yet during that period its tax revenues from mining actually decreased (Besada, Lisk and Martin 2015). If a state increases its taxes on a corporation (thereby reducing its net profits), there is the danger that it will just move its business elsewhere – leaving thousands unemployed. The same structural scenario leads to a lack of incentive to fully regulate and monitor tax compliance and payments – which provides a fertile ground for tax evasion and corruption. One study found that the amount of money that leaves Africa each year through illicit tax practices by corporations based in the West is nearly three times the total amount of aid and grants the continent receives (Global Justice Now 2017). Another study shows that in 2010 alone, states of the Global South lost over US$1 trillion to illicit financial practices, mostly in the form of tax evasion (Hickel 2014). This discussion suggests that the exploitation of the Global South did not end with independence, it just took on different forms.

Key works in postcolonialism have explored how representations of the Global South have fuelled imperialism by analysing enduring orientalism in Western discourse. For example, in Western depictions of the War on Terror, the depiction of the Eastern woman as a passive victim in need of rescue was used as part of the justification for certain interventions. This can be seen when US First Lady Laura Bush claimed that the War on Terror was 'a fight for the rights and dignity of women'. Orientalism divides the world into 'West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burqas' (Abu-Lughod 2002, 784); a world of 'white men saving brown women from brown men', as Spivak (1985) once put it.

In colonial times, Orientalist representations were made possible by the West's exploration into, and domination over, the Orient. They also made continuing exploration and domination possible by constructing the Orient in the Western imagination as a barbaric place in need of 'civilisation'. Present-day Orientalism is made possible by the cultural and political dominance of the West, and it makes possible continuing military intervention in the Middle East, in regions that are not seen as capable of governing themselves and protecting their own citizens – especially women – and are seen as a threat to the West. This is a crucial point in postcolonialism: that representations of former colonies can tell us much more about the West's power over them than they can about the societies themselves. Orientalism leads to the assumption that the West knows best and that any intervention by the West in the East will be not only benevolent, but also beneficial. Of course, as the example of Iraq shows – a state that has been marred by instability since the US-led invasions in 1991 and 2003 – this can often be far from true.

Postcolonialism therefore laments that the discipline has historically been dominated by flawed perspectives, principally written by white Western scholars and published in the English language. It challenges International Relations to reflect on the kinds of knowledge this produces. It shows that scholarship produced in the West that does not challenge centuries-old Western assumptions about the 'other' is in danger not only of failing to recognise the historical legacies of colonialism that influence current inequalities, but also of actually reproducing those inequalities. Postcolonial scholars are, therefore, important contributors to the field as their critique widens the focus of enquiry beyond International Relations' traditionally Western mindset and reflects the more diverse perspectives of our world.

Feminism

Another theory that critiques the inequality inherent in the global system is feminism. Feminism entered the field in the 1980s as part of the emerging movement critiquing the traditional theories. It focused on explaining why so few women seemed to be in positions of power and examining the implications of this on how international relations were structured. Recognising this introduces a 'gendered' reading of International Relations, where we place gender as the prime object in focus.

Once we have answered the question of where the women are (certainly not in political power relative to men) feminism will invite a deeper question that asks us to consider how we can reconstruct international relations so it can account for the experiences of all people. For some feminists this can be achieved by adding women to areas where they have been excluded, for example, all-women candidate lists in elections to ensure more women are elected, and some governments having gender-balanced cabinets. Developments like these, while a sign of progress, are often felt to not be enough to address what feminists refer to as a patriarchal culture – the male-driven environment that created such things as politics (and business) and led to the structural exclusion of women in the first place. In this sense, it is not men that are the problem per se, but a certain manifestation of the male gender that has enabled a distorted political and economic system to emerge across the world.

There are various different branches of feminism that each frame gender in different ways and place a greater emphasis on certain inequalities. Examples of early liberal feminists include nineteenth-century campaigners such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Harriet Taylor Mill and the early-twentieth-century suffragette movement, which used activism and civil disobedience to campaign for women's rights to vote in the United Kingdom (which was passed into law in 1928), and in doing so inspired movements elsewhere. Contemporary liberal feminists prioritise issues such as equal representation in political office, equal representation in corporate governance and equal pay – arguing that these will help to catalyse wider change. Marxist feminists, by contrast, are interested in how current economic

and political structures depend on, exploit and undervalue women's labour, both in factories and workplaces and in the home. For example, Cynthia Enloe (1989) wrote about how women's labour is exploited everywhere from banana plantations, to military bases, to tourist beaches, and is essential to the global economy. Postcolonial feminists are interested in how new forms of colonialism impact women of the Global South. For example, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) argues that white Western feminists frequently reproduce colonial discourses of rescue towards women of the Global South, as already explored above in the section on postcolonialism. Poststructuralist feminists are interested in how our understandings of what it is to be a man, or a woman, shape the different roles we are able to take on in the world and the very structures of power that govern us. Carol Cohn (1987), for example, analysed how sexist and sexualised language used by US defence intellectuals to describe nuclear weapons masks the potential atrocities these weapons could cause and even makes them seem desirable.

To bring our discussion of feminism back to its familial roots, whatever variant it may take, feminism at its core unites to challenge International Relations to reflect on its historical dominance by men and the exclusion, until recently, of the experiences, perspectives and qualities of women. Sometimes this is as explicit as the language used in many of the discipline's foundational texts, which refer to 'man' to describe all of humankind (mankind). It can also be seen in the qualities that traditional theories, especially realism, put forward as universal truths about the nature of 'man' – rational, calculating and aggressive to name a few – which have historically been perceived as masculine qualities in almost every culture in the world. Feminists ask why these have been valued above supposedly feminine ones such as emotion, compassion and pacifism – which are equally 'human' in their nature. Of course, most feminists would argue that these are not inherently masculine or feminine qualities, but rather that (to borrow constructivist terminology) they have been socially constructed as such for centuries.

The crucial point here is that only the qualities deemed to be masculine have been taken to be relevant to theorising about human nature and statecraft in the traditional theory families. This results in theories, such as realism, which not only ignore the experiences of large parts of the population, but also become self-fulfilling prophecies as they create the aggressive, competitive political system that they claim to be describing. As V. Spike Peterson (1992) argues, as long as gender remains 'invisible' it may be unclear what 'taking gender seriously' means. Ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman – the social construction of gender – permeate every aspect of international politics and of our daily lives. In seeking to understand how and why that happens, and with what effects, feminism hopes to make the world a fairer place for everyone. Here, you might again see some overlaps – with constructivism in this case, for example.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is perhaps the most controversial of the critical theories as it questions the very beliefs we have all come to know and feel as being 'real'. Poststructuralists do this by critiquing the dominant narratives that have been widely accepted by other theories. These, they believe, have evolved into metanarratives – complex accounts explaining how the world works that are unquestioned by most people, but are really just convincing stories created by those in power. For instance, liberals and realists both accept the idea of the state and for the most part take it for granted. Such assumptions are foundational 'truths' on which those traditional theories rest – becoming 'structures' (or metanarratives) around which they build their account of reality. So, although these two theoretical families may seem to be in opposition, they actually share a general understanding of the world. Neither realism nor liberalism in their modern forms seek to challenge the existence of the state nor attempt to think beyond it – they simply count it as part of their reality. Poststructuralism seeks to question these commonly held assumptions of reality that are taken for granted, such as the state – but also more widely the nature of power.

Jacques Derrida's contribution in this area was in how he showed that you could deconstruct language to identify deeper, or alternative, meanings in texts. If you can deconstruct language (expose its hidden meanings and the power it has), then you can do the same with fundamental ideas that shape international relations – such as the state. By introducing doubt over why the state exists, and who it exists for, poststructuralists unlock questions about central components of our political world that traditional theories would rather avoid. If you can shake the foundations of a structure, be that a word or an idea, you can move beyond it in your thinking and become free of the power it has over you. This approach introduces doubt to the reality we assume to share and exposes the often thin foundations

that some commonly held 'truths' stand upon as we live in a world of metanarratives that can each be dissected, if so desired.

You might ask why someone would want to do such a thing, and for that we can turn to Michel Foucault. Through the 1960s to 1980s he wrote prolifically about the idea that power and knowledge are mutually constitutive – that is, they create and reinforce one another. Within societies, only some groups of people – elites such as politicians, journalists and academic experts – have the power to shape our common understandings of a particular subject. And those common understandings in society come to influence how we act on any given issue, who we trust as an expert on it and who we choose to govern us, thus reinforcing the positions of power of those elites. You might (again) be seeing some overlaps here, this time with Marxism – for example via the idea of how elites control society – but poststructuralists take critiques such as this to a deeper level and reach results that go beyond the critique found in Marxism.

Discourses – our shared understandings – shape how we as a society respond to issues. For example, da Silva and Crilley (2017) analysed comments on newspaper websites and social media by British people discussing the choice of some British citizens to travel to Syria and join Islamic State. They concluded that the majority of people posting believed foreign fighters were motivated primarily by religion and had been brainwashed into unwavering support for a violent ideology. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the most popular prescriptions for how the UK government should respond to these fighters were to revoke their passports and criminally punish them. Poststructuralists recognise this as evidence of a particular discourse that had become dominant in a society – in this case displaying an understanding of terrorists as being irrational and unable to be reasoned with. While that may be true in some cases, perhaps some of these foreign fighters were motivated by more complex causes such as disillusionment with British foreign policy in the Middle East, Islamophobia in the UK, unemployment, poverty, functional illiteracy, or boredom. Research suggests that media coverage of measures such as harsh legal punishments and revocation of passports only serve to deepen the feelings of exclusion, the very feelings that can make somebody vulnerable to radicalisation (Lister 2015).

Poststructuralism does not focus on ethical judgements about issues such as terrorism. Instead, it shows how dominant discourses close down the options available in responding to such issues. For example, the understanding of terrorists as irrational rules out any possibility of their rehabilitation and reintegration into society through efforts to better understand the causes of their radicalisation. This not only leads to lost human potential, but also to a more violent world as only military and security measures seem like rational responses to terrorism and these in turn exacerbate many of the causes of radicalisation. In turn, these measures enhance the power of the state by giving it yet more power over the individual in the name of counterterrorism.

For poststructuralists, we can never experience anything outside discourse – that is through shared understandings that dominate our societies. As poststructuralists seek to question universal truths and metanarratives, the core of their theory is to actively choose not to take ideas as we know them for granted, nor to see certain paths of action as inevitable. Above all, poststructuralism encourages us to question how those in positions of power frame a particular issue and how doing so might serve to represent their interests and to shore up that position of power. Again, you may see some overlap here with the other theories in this chapter, such as feminism and postcolonialism. In fact, all of the theories discussed in this chapter explore in one way or another how power operates in international relations to oppress certain peoples.

Conclusion

There are many more theory families in International Relations than the ones explored in this excerpt (see McGlinchey, Walters and Scheinpflug 2017). Yet, the theories covered so far offer a solid starting point for achieving an understanding of where the most common approaches are situated and what they bring to International Relations. It is fair to say that the critical theories are usually regarded by students as more difficult to grasp than the traditional and middle ground theories. However, this is a reflection of the fact that today's world is much more complex than at any time prior and so we need more complex tools to deal with this. Each of the theories covered forms a tool kit that provides the foundations for opening up ways to ask questions about International Relations.

The references for the citations in this excerpt, together with much more on theory – such as case studies and pedagogical resources – can be found in McGlinchey, Stephen. 2022. *Foundations of International Relations* (London: Bloomsbury).

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